

# Splits, lumps and shuffles

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This series focuses on recent taxonomic proposals – descriptions of new taxa, splits, lumps or reorganisations – that are likely to be of greatest interest to birders. This latest instalment includes: a new genus of potoo; a long anticipated split in Thrush-like Antpitta, and a remarkable three newly described species, a screech owl, an antbird, and a manakin.

## A name at last for a no-name screech owl

**T**he indefatigable collector M. A. Carriker obtained a specimen, almost 100 years ago, of a screech owl in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, in northern Colombia. Carriker was of the opinion that he had discovered a new species. In the final report on his expedition, however, it was entered as an odd example of

Tropical Screech Owl *Megascops choliba*, with the comment that ‘it certainly differs’ from other specimens, and ‘may very well represent a distinct form’ (Todd & Carriker 1922). The distinctiveness of this specimen was dismissed by later authors (e.g. Meyer de Schauensee 1949), and Todd and Carriker’s comments all but forgotten.

As birders began returning to the Santa Martas, however, there were encounters with a screech owl with a distinctive voice. A recent genetic analysis



Almost a century after first being noticed, the distinctiveness of **1** Santa Marta Screech Owl *Megascops gilesi* (Santa Marta Mountains, Santa Marta, Magdalena, Colombia, January 2016; Glenn Bartley/[glennbartley.com](http://glennbartley.com)) has finally been formally recognised with its description as a full species.

(Dantas *et al.* 2016, reviewed in *Neotropical Birding* 18: 24–25) confirmed that the Santa Marta bird most definitely is *not* related to Tropical, but instead is closer to Peruvian Screech Owl *M. roboratus*, Tawny-bellied Screech Owl *M. watsonii* and Black-capped Screech Owl *M. atricapilla*.

Now Niels Krabbe – another renowned field ornithologist – has formally described this species as Santa Marta Screech Owl *Megascops gilesi*; the species name honours Robert Giles, ‘who funded and took an active part in establishing a bird reserve near the type locality’ (Krabbe 2017). So, an armchair tick for many, as this owl has been reliable in recent years for visiting birders. On the other hand... Krabbe also reviewed the vocalisations of all Neotropical screech owls, and came away with the more disheartening suggestion that two other species may need to be lumped: Colombian Screech Owl *M. colombianus* is not distinguishable, by voice, from Rufescent Screech Owl *M. ingens*; and similarly, Napo Screech Owl *M. napensis* has the same vocalisations as Roraiman Screech Owl *M. roraimae*.

## A new genus for one *Nyctibius*

**Potoos** *Nyctibius* are well known for their camouflaged plumage and upright posture, with which they mimic a dead snag. But as Rufous Potoo *N. bracteatus* becomes better known, it emerges again and again as the exception to every potoo rule. Costa and colleagues – a veritable dream team of researchers with an avid interest in potoos – enumerate the many ways in which Rufous is the odd potoo out (Costa *et al.* 2018). Genetically it is quite divergent, sitting on a separate branch that places it at the ‘base’ of the potoo phylogenetic tree. Its plumage is not grey and brown but (of course) rufous, heavily spotted with white, especially on the underparts but also on the wing coverts. The iris is yellow, as in most other potoos, but has a unique dark wedge, just below the pupil. The skeleton, especially the skull, also differs in a large number of features from other potoos.

Some of the most intriguing differences between Rufous and all other potoos, however,



Genetic, plumage and behavioural lines of evidence justify a separate genus (*Phyllaemulor*) for Rufous Potoo *Nyctibius bracteatus*. For example, whereas **2** Great Potoo *N. grandis* (Transpantaneira, Mato Grosso, Brazil, September 2008; James Lowen/[jameslowen.com](http://jameslowen.com)) sits with its body aligned to the substrate, Rufous Potoo **3** perches on thin, roughly horizontal branches (Gareno Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, February 2016; Josh Beck/[birdsofpassage.wordpress.com](http://birdsofpassage.wordpress.com)) and **4** even appears to imitate a large dead leaf (Gareno Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, February 2015; Ben Porter/[benporterwildlife.co.uk](http://benporterwildlife.co.uk)).



are in behaviour. Unlike all other potoos, Rufous does not sit with the body aligned with the substrate, but instead perches on slender, more or less horizontal branches; therefore it positions itself perpendicular to the substrate. Costa *et al.* interpret the combination of roosting posture, and plumage colour, as mimicking the appearance of a large dead leaf, such as often are trapped in forest understory. When disturbed, other species of potoo close the eyes and slowly extend the neck upward, so that the body and bill are parallel to the perch, reinforcing the resemblance to a dead snag. Rufous Potoo does no such thing. Rather, it commences to slowly rock back and forth, which Costa *et al.* interpret as an effort to emulate a large dead leaf stirred by a light breeze. Indeed, Rufous Potoo may commence this rocking behavior under other circumstances as well, but apparently is most frequent in response to understorey air currents. The combination of divergent genetics, morphology and plumage, and behaviour, impel Costa *et al.* to propose that a new genus, *Phyllaemulor* (roughly, 'leaf like'), be erected for this thoroughly remarkable bird.

## Striking gold in the Cordillera Azul

The Cordillera Azul is a large, isolated and mostly roadless range of Andean foothills in north-central Peru. This range was unknown ornithologically until the summer of 1996, when John O'Neill organised the first avifaunal survey of the region. When Dan Lane, a participant in the expedition, reached the top of one of the highest points in the Cordillera, he was surprised to discover a strikingly distinct new species, Scarlet-banded Barbet *Capito wallacei* (O'Neill *et al.* 2000). In view of the immense logistical difficulties in reaching 'Barbet Peak', it was big news when intrepid birders Todd Mark and Walter Vargas later discovered a new location for the barbet at a different location, then known as Plataforma. Now called Flor de Café, this site is accessible by road, albeit one that is unpaved and can be notoriously difficult to travel. Still, birders trickled in, eager to tick the barbet.

One such visitor was Josh Beck, who in July 2016 had one of the luckiest days of his birding life when he observed and audio-recorded an unknown terrestrial antbird. In what is close to record time in the modern era to move from discovery to description, Moncrieff *et al.* (2018) formally name this antbird as Cordillera Azul Antbird *Myrmoderus eowilsoni*. This is not yet another wholly grey (male) or brown (female) member of the family, but an honest-to-goodness



5 Cordillera Azul Antbird *Myrmoderus eowilsoni*, Flor de Café/Plataforma, San Martín, Peru, October 2016 (Andrew Spencer/Macaulay Library ML41480781). A stunning, entirely new species that somehow eluded detection by even experienced visiting birders.

stunner of an antbird, most similar to Ferruginous-backed Antbird *M. ferrugineus* of eastern Amazonia. Cordillera Azul Antbird remains known only from the vicinity of Flor de Café, but – as turned out to be the case with Scarlet-banded Barbet – no doubt it occurs elsewhere in this cordillera. After all, some highly skilled birders had visited Flor de Café and overlooked this species before Josh Beck encountered it, so it may even turn up at other sites that already have been surveyed. Time will tell on that score. The species name is a nod to E. O. Wilson, the renowned evolutionary biologist and conservationist.

## Lowland antpittas come into focus

Antpittas reach their greatest diversity in the Andes, but the distribution of the group is more widespread, and in fact two genera – *Hylopezus* and *Myrmothera* – primarily occur in humid lowland forests. Carneiro *et al.* (2018) performed a comprehensive phylogenetic survey of these lowland antpittas, based on DNA sequence data. Their study confirmed some relationships suggested by other lines of evidence, but also offered some unexpected insights.

One of the biggest surprises concerns Speckle-breasted Antpitta *Hylopezus nattereri*, which was classified as a subspecies of White-browed Antpitta *H. ochroleucus* until Whitney *et al.* (1995)



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A study of lowland antpittas has produced some fascinating findings. **6** Speckle-breasted Antpitta *Hylopezus nattereri* (Corvo road, Quatro Barras, Paraná, Brazil, June 2013; Adrian Rupp/Adrian Rupp Birding Tours) appears to be a sister species to all other lowland antpittas, and thus worthy of a separate genus. Meanwhile, **7** the widespread Thrush-like Antpitta *Myrmothera campanisona* (Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil, February 2015; Anselmo d’Affonseca) appears to have concealed a distinct species in its taxonomic mix, namely **8** ‘Tapajos Antpitta’ *M. (c.) subcanescens* (Belterra, Pará, Brazil, February 2016; Margi Moss/[riosvoadores.com.br](http://riosvoadores.com.br)).

two species again are not closely related. An unexpected twist is that some *Hylopezus* – Thicket Antpitta *H. dives*, White-lored Antpitta *H. fulviventris* and Amazonian Antpitta *H. berlepschi* – are closer to the genus *Myrmothera* than they are to other *Hylopezus*, and so probably *Myrmothera* will be expanded to include them.

Finally, for listers, there is an important new split. It long has been known that one subspecies of Thrush-like Antpitta *Myrmothera campanisona* – namely *subcanescens*, which occurs in Brazil south of the Amazon and east of the Madeira River – has a song that differs strikingly from that of all other subspecies (Krabbe & Schulenberg 2003). Carneiro *et al.* now show that *subcanescens* also is genetically very distinct: closer, in fact, to Tepui Antpitta *M. simplex* than to other subspecies of Thrush-like! That’s a surprising biogeographic pattern (although in hindsight, the songs of Tepui and *subcanescens* are rather similar ...), but at any rate, that’s an obvious split. Tapajos Antpitta seems to be the going English name for *subcanescens* (del Hoyo & Collar 2016).

documented that these two differ vocally. Carneiro *et al.* find that not only is Speckle-breasted not closely related to White-browed, it is the ‘sister’ to *all* other species of lowland antpittas. They suggest that Speckle-breasted should be classified in a separate genus, which they indicate will be formally described in a separate publication.

The earlier split (Maijer 1998) of Masked Antpitta *H. auricularis* from Spotted Antpitta *H. macularius* also now has genetic support, as Carneiro and colleagues show that these





9a



9b



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It has taken more than 20 years since the initial discovery, but **9a & 9b** Painted Manakin *Machaeropterus eckelberryi* (Waqanki Lodge, Moyobamba, San Martín, Peru, October 2015; Michael Harvey/LSU Peru Big Day) has been described as a new species, separate from Striped Manakin *Machaeropterus regulus*. The type description also endorses the split, already adopted by some authorities, between **10** Eastern Striped Manakin *M. regulus* (Serra Bonita Reserve, Camacan, Bahia, Brazil, March 2016; Ciro Albano/NE Brazil Birding) and **11** Western Striped Manakin *M. striolatus* (here subspecies *antioquiae*, Parque Ecológico Miravalle, Jamundí, Valle del Cauca, Colombia, April 2015; Juan José Arango E.: [flickr.com/photos/jjarango/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jjarango/)).

those of standard Striped Manakin, populations of which occurred in the adjacent lowlands. Clearly two species were involved, but the rub is that the yellow-breasted highland form looks eerily similar to another subspecies of Striped Manakin, *aureopectus*, which occurs on the tepuis of southern Venezuela and adjacent Brazil (and adjacent Guyana?). And until recently, the vocalisations of *aureopectus* were undescribed. Newly available recordings of *aureopectus*, however, indicate that (surprisingly) its voice is similar to that of other western Amazonian populations of Striped Manakin.

Armed with this knowledge, then, Lane and colleagues describe the birds from the Cordillera Azul as a new species, Painted Manakin *Machaeropterus eckelberryi*. The species name honours the late Donald R. Eckelberry, 'one of the greatest American bird artists of the twentieth century' and a conservationist who contributed to the establishment of the Asa Wright Nature Centre on Trinidad (Lane *et al.* 2017). And, as with the case of the barbet, no one need fret about access to 'Barbet Peak' to see the new species: Painted Manakin turns out to be readily tickable by road near Moyobamba in the Mayo Valley in northern Peru.

## Cordillera Azul redux

Scarlet-banded Barbet was not the only ornithological novelty that John O'Neill, Dan Lane and colleagues encountered in the Cordillera Azul back in 1996. On 'Barbet Peak' they also discovered an odd Striped Manakin *Machaeropterus regulus*: the males have a distinctive bold yellow patch on the breast, and their vocalisations also differ from

Lane and colleagues also confirm a previously reported difference in vocalisations between Striped Manakins in eastern Brazil (subspecies *regulus*) and those in western South America (Whittaker & Oren 1999). Thus they endorse a split, already adopted by some (del Hoyo & Collar 2016), between Eastern Striped Manakin *M. regulus* and Western Striped Manakin *M. striolatus*.

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